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ABSTRACT

To help educators quickly grasp demographic information and social and economic issues facing migrant farmworkers, this digest summarizes several recent federal reports. These reports are the National Agricultural Workers Survey, conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1997-98; Current Population Survey data, from the Census Bureau; and the Farm Labor Survey, conducted four times a year by the National Agricultural Statistics Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This digest covers the immigration status, ethnicity, age, gender, and marital status of migrant farmworkers, and whether they lived with their families; number of weeks of employment during the year, hourly wages, annual income, and poverty status; employee benefits and use of health and social services; native language, educational attainment, and illiteracy rate; and extent of child labor, minors' wages, and impact of youth labor on education. (SV)

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What Federal Statistics Reveal about Migrant Farmworkers: A Summary for Education

Gary G. Huang

To help educators quickly grasp demographic information and social and economic issues facing migrant farmworkers, this Digest summarizes several recent federal reports. Some reports cover the overall agricultural labor force, using terms such as *hired* or *paid farmworkers*, *agricultural workers*, *crop workers*, or *migrant farmworkers*. These terms overlap to a large extent and generally refer to a socially and economically disadvantaged group of Latino migratory farmworkers. We shift terms in this Digest to accommodate definitions used in the following sources:

- *National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)*, a national survey conducted by the Department of Labor that collects data about paid farmworkers (Samardick, Gabbard, & Lewis, 2000)
- *Current Population Survey (CPS)*, conducted by the Census Bureau, which includes up-to-date demographic data about farmworkers
- *Farm Labor Survey (FLS)*, conducted four times a year by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which gathers information on agricultural occupations, including migrant farmworkers

Immigration Status, Age, and Gender

According to the most recent *NAWS* (fiscal year 1997-98), approximately 56 percent of U.S. farmworkers were migrants who traveled more than 75 miles to do crop work. Of this portion, 17 percent were *follow-the-crop migrants* who had two or more farm jobs located more than 75 miles apart, and 39 percent were *shuttle migrants* whose farm jobs were more than 75 miles away from their residences (Mehta et al., 2000). While a majority of farmworkers had a home base in the United States, 42 percent had their homes outside the United States, primarily in Mexico. Migrant farmworkers were younger than nonmigrant farmworkers, with a median age of 26 for follow-the-crop migrants, 27 for shuttle migrants, and over 31 for nonmigrants. While the 1997-98 *NAWS* report did not provide the migrant population size, the 1994 report estimated that 1.6 million out of the 2.5 million farmworkers were seasonal agricultural workers and that 670,000 (37 percent of all farmworkers) were migrant farmworkers (Gabbard, Mines, & Boccalandro, 1994). The 1999-2002 *FLS* quarterly estimates show much lower percentages for migrant farmworkers, ranging from 6 percent in January 1999 to 12.4 percent in July 1999 (NASS, 2002).*

NAWS data revealed that most farmworkers (81 percent) were foreign born, a 1990s demographic change in rural areas known as *Latinization*. Migrant farmworkers were more likely to be foreign born (nine out of ten) relative to nonmigrants (only two thirds). More than half of farmworkers (52 percent) were unauthorized workers, and only 22 percent were citizens. Of the work-authorized farmworkers, 40 percent were citizens by birth; the rest acquired residence under the special agricultural worker program, family reunification programs, or other legal immigrant channels (Mehta et al., 2000).

Farmworkers in general were young (79 percent between the ages of 18 and 44) and male (80 percent). Slightly more than half of the population was married, but many did not live with their nuclear families. Married males were less likely to live with their families than married females. Most women (more than 90 percent) lived with their children, but less than half of fathers (42 percent) were able to do so. A substantial portion of farmworker families (about 45 percent) had children, but only half of parents lived with children (Mehta et al., 2000). Thus, mothers play a major role in migrant farmworker children's education.

The most recent report on farmworkers' demographics from the Census' *CPS* report confirmed the *NAWS* description. *CPS* had no specific data about *migrant* farmworkers; and some statistical discrepancies were inevitable if directly comparing *CPS* with *NAWS*. Nevertheless, farmworkers' basic characteristics were similar as portrayed in the two sources. Compared with all wage and salary workers, *CPS* data showed that hired farmworkers were predominantly Latino, young, unmarried, poorly educated, and noncitizens; and many such characteristics remained largely unchanged throughout the 1990s (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2000).

Work and Income

Migrant farmworkers are a critical component of the U.S. agricultural production system, comprising 55 percent of the short-term farm-task labor force, 64 percent of the harvest labor force, and 45 percent of the peak season labor force (Gabbard et al., 1994). Despite its importance, this population continues to struggle in a highly unstable and oversupplied agricultural labor market. According to the 1994 *NAWS* estimation, on average, migrants worked only 29 weeks per year. The situation worsened in later years, especially for newly arrived migrants. In the 1997-98 fiscal year, on average, migrant farmworkers with one year of experience in the United States worked only 17 weeks per year (Mehta et al., 2000).

According to *NAWS*, migrant farmworkers' income in general declined, even during the 1990s economic boom. Between 1989 and 1998 the average real hourly wage of farmworkers, adjusted for inflation, fell by 11 percent (Mehta et al., 2000). It is striking to observe this group's declining earnings amid rural revival and rising income levels of nonfarm jobs during the 1990s (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1997). Nearly three quarters of farmworkers earned less than $10,000 a year and three out of five farmworker families lived in poverty (Mehta et al., 2000). Poverty rose from 54 percent for migrant farmworkers in 1994 (Gabbard et al., 1994) to at least 61 percent, the rate for the entire farmworker population (Mehta et al., 2000). Other indicators of economic well-being, such as car and home ownership, showed a consistent declining pattern for the population.

The *CPS* data confirmed this portrayal of persistent low income and poverty among hired farmworkers. In 1999, of the estimated 585,000 hired farmworkers 25 years and older, 47

* The discrepancy may have several causes, including the different definitions of migrants; NASS defines them as farmworkers whose employment requires travel that prevents them from returning to their permanent place of residence the same day.

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percent had an income that was under the poverty line. The proportion of full-time low-wage earners in hired farmworkers was greater than in all other occupations except workers for private households and nonprotective services (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2000).

Employer Benefits and Social Services

Migrant farmworkers received very limited employee benefits. According to *NAWS*, in the 1997-98 fiscal year, only 15 percent of hired farmworkers reported receiving monetary bonuses from employers; 45 percent were covered by unemployment insurance; and only 28 percent of all farmworkers reported workers' compensation in some form (17 percent simply did not know whether they had such benefits).

Even facing all the socioeconomic disadvantages, farmworkers rarely used social services. The 1997-98 *NAWS* found that only one fifth of farmworkers or their family members received unemployment insurance benefits in the past 2 years, and barely 1 percent used disability or social security benefits.

The use of needs-based services was low among hired farmworkers. Needs-based services include Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), general assistance or welfare, publicly subsidized housing or medical and nutritional assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. In 1997-98, only 17 percent of farmworkers used such services. The 1997-98 *NAWS* also revealed that few farmworkers had received support from churches, family, community organizations, and friends. *NAWS* offered no information about services provided by public schools, such as subsidized lunches and remedial English instruction to migrant children.

Education and Training

The 1997-98 *NAWS* shows that Spanish was the native language for most farmworkers (84 percent). Education was low in this population, with a median of 6th grade schooling. Only 15 percent completed high school. Most farmworkers (73 percent) received their education in Mexico, only 21 percent were educated in the United States, and the former group's median schooling was low relative to the latter (6th vs. 11th grade).

One in five farmworkers had taken some adult education programs, including GED and English. Only a small portion of them had attended college or university classes (3 percent) or other classes such as citizenship, job training, and adult basic education (3 percent). Adult education participation appeared to be related to previous schooling: The more years of schooling received, the higher the rate of adult education participation (Mehta et al., 2000). The 1997-98 *NAWS* indicated high rates of illiteracy in this population (completely illiterate at 20 percent, functionally illiterate at 38 percent, and marginally literate at 27 percent). English proficiency levels varied by birthplace and ethnicity. Mexican-born and other foreign-born Latino farmworkers had extremely low rates of English fluency (2-4 percent).

Young Farmworkers and Children of Farmworkers

By interviewing children aged 14 to 17 and parents working at farms, the *NAWS* gathered data for two groups: young farmworkers and children of farmworkers. The summary of the 1993-1998 data revealed that approximately 7 percent of all farmworkers were between the ages of 14 to 17, equivalent to 126,000 children who did farm work in that period (Samardick et al., 2000). Most of these young farmworkers were males, 16 or 17 years old, who were born in the United States; and more than half (54 percent) of them did not live with their parents. The young farmworkers were less likely to migrate than the adult population (36 percent vs. 51 percent). It should be noted, however, that the teenage subsample in *NAWS* included some children of rural middle-class families who participated in seasonal fieldwork.

Minors working in agriculture were paid even less than their adult counterparts. According to the NAWS data for 1993-98, teens were more prevalent in the lowest-wage jobs. While 23 percent of adults earned minimum wage or less, 30 percent of teen farmworkers did so. Forty percent of adults and 50 percent of teens were paid between minimum wage and $1 more than minimum wage. Adults were almost twice as likely to have the higher-paying jobs. About 2 in 5 adults (37 percent) made more than $1 over the minimum wage, compared with only 1 in 5 minors.

While most farmworkers were foreign-born, their children (73 percent) were mostly born in the United States. The children of farmworkers in general did not do farm work with their parents, primarily because of their young age (83 percent under 14). Migrants' children, however, were more likely to work in the fields than settled farmworkers' children.

U.S.-born Hispanics accounted for only 12 percent of farmworkers, but 80 percent of this subgroup were children of farmworkers (Gabbard et al., 1994). Most U.S.-born children of Hispanic farmworkers did not do farm jobs and expected to leave farm work in the future; only 5 percent of this subgroup did some farm work at a given time. An implication is that international migration will continue to replenish the U.S. agricultural labor force.

NAWS further showed young farmworkers' education to be at risk. More than a third were school dropouts, while 17 percent of them went to school at a grade level lower than their age peers. Likewise, farmworkers' children were educationally disadvantaged. One quarter of school-aged children of farmworkers were behind in grade or had dropped out of school. Working in the fields imposed even greater risk to children of farmworkers, with more than a third falling behind their grade level or dropping out of school.

Conclusions

During the 1990s there were few signs of improvement in the social, economic, or educational status of migrant farmworkers. However, their U.S.-born children did not appear to be locked into the same employment patterns as their parents. Even though grade retention and dropout rates among this group were high, as indicated in the *NAWS* study, it appears by deduction that the large majority *were* keeping up with their grade level or were managing to make it through high school. However, it is hard to know with any certainty how well they are doing because it has been more than 10 years since migrant student educational achievement and attainment have been studied (National Commission on Migrant Education, 1992). With federal efforts underway to leave no child behind, a new study could provide essential information to U.S. educators as they plan educational reform for this marginalized group of students.

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